Spring Break— Desert Style

Death Valley Caravans in the 1930s

by John Southworth

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KEEPSAKE No. 30

Cover Photo: Starting down the old Nadeau Grade, the 1930 Chemistry Field Trip caravan from Hoover High School, Glendale, Calif., stops so all can enjoy their first view of Panamint Valley from the summit of the Slate Range. (This and all photos used herein are from the author's collection.)

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Mrs. Moir poses on the 20-mule team wagon at entrance to Furnace Creek Ranch, 1940.

This Keepsake is an appreciation of Mrs. Helen Moir, chemistry teacher, who unlocked the mysteries of Death Valley for twenty generations of high school students.

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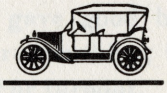

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Exceptionally heavy traffic across the Devil's Golf Course on the floor of Death Valley came to a total standstill on a particular day in the Spring of 1933 for a very peculiar reason.

The bee-line, dead-flat road through the salt flats was just two rough tracks. It was literally beaten through the surprisingly high and hard salt spikes of the Devil's Golf Course many years before by Chinese labor wielding sledge hammers.

This road was the original trail of the 20-mule team borax wagons, unimproved in about 50 years, headed straight across the valley, water to water. The hard salt gave good but ever-shifting footing, the ultimate result being a car-wrenching, three miles per hour, strictly one-way track without fork or turnout.

In the Spring of 1933, a caravan of 16 cars from Hoover High School in Glendale, California, essayed the salty crossing southbound in full daylight. This caravan moved slowly, and stopped often to allow its many participants to fully appreciate the wonders of the extensive salt pools, search for halite crystals therein, beat on the reverberating salt spikes, or listen for the eternal crunch and pop, as thousands of acres of recrystalizing salt pushed up wet from below to dry and forcefully reshape themselves near the surface.

While all this traffic was inching its way along, a single car entered the narrow, one-way passage from the south. The trouble started when the one, driven by a determined older man accompanied by his vitriolic and equally determined wife, met the opposing 16 crowded with lighthearted teenagers. There was no way to avoid the ensuing confrontation out in the middle of the salt flat.

The stand-off was complete. The weight of numbers in one direction

was effectively balanced by a towering rage headed in the opposite direction. "How could you do this to us, couldn't you see us coming, and all of you have to back up!" All this in a place where backing up in either direction was totally out of the question.

While the lead cars ineffectually faced headlight to headlight and their frustrated drivers discussed their few options in loud voices, Burnell Yarick, a student leader of the high school group, came forward to Car Number Two with a quiet suggestion to the caravan's organizer and woman in charge, Mrs. Helen Moir, chemistry teacher and expedition leader.

Gaining an amused approval, and while the principals raged up front, Burnell gathered some of his associates who in turn enlisted most of the otherwise unengaged manpower from a line of 16 cars strung across the Devil's Golf Course. They proceeded forward, but not to do battle. Rapidly organizing their forces, they quickly enveloped the opposing automobile and lifted it bodily, infuriated occupants and all, off the track and out into the salty pinnacles where it was left high, dry, and immobile. Then the unobstructed caravan paraded by, the hilarious students waving and hollering encouraging words such as: "We'll come back for you tomorrow."

Down the road a piece, the caravan stopped long enough for the perpetrators to walk back, a bit reluctantly, I presume, to undo their dastardly deed. There were many unusual sounds out among the salt pinnacles that day. Surprisingly, no heart attacks were reported.

The caravan of chemistry students through Death Valley was an annual event during Easter Vacation for at least 20 years. Begun by Park Turrill of Glendale High School as an inspection trip to chemical plants in the Mojave Desert, the first trip, in 1925, reached Trona and lasted two days. The 1926 trip, which lasted somewhat longer, brought 15 cars and 74 students, parents and faculty members into Death Valley by way of Owl Hole Spring and Eagle Borax Works. All subsequent trips, with widely varying itineraries, involved nine days of travel with eight nights out in the open. Both sexes were welcome and

Bob Hanson loses his balance while posing on a salt pinnacle. Devil's Golf Course, 1934.

The 1930 caravan prepares for a hostile attack in the Texas Springs area.

An informal 1940 conference. Scotty chats with Mrs. Moir.

Mushroom Rock attracts a visitor. Bob Hanson poses, 1934.

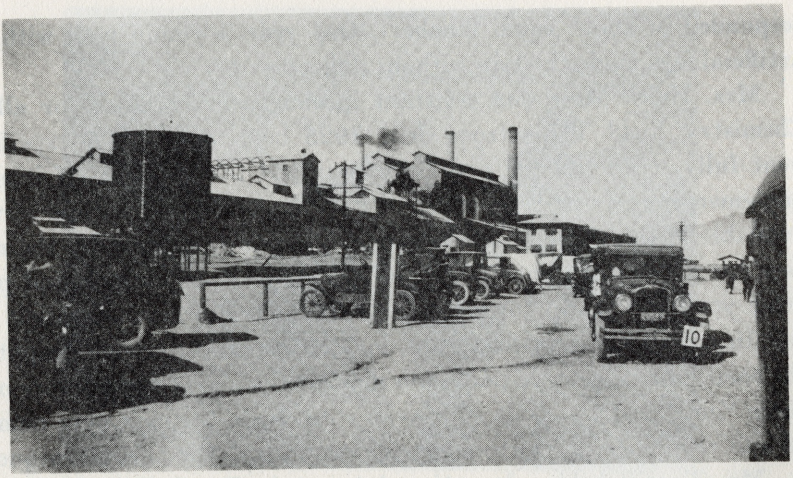
responded in about equal numbers. One year a young man with two artificial legs made the trip without difficulty.

Mrs. Helen Moir was assistant in charge of logistics for all the Chemistry Field Trips from their 1925 beginning. Each expedition went fully self-contained and fully equipped to take care of itself in any emergency as there were few travelers and fewer roadside services available in the whole desert region. Food was organized by the numbers for groups of about 20, each with its own set of pots and pans. (One year one group forgot to repack the containers overnight and lost them at their very first stop, in Victorville, to passing knights of the road.) Lunches were packed in numbered shoe boxes and were often eaten "on the fly" without a caravan stop. Even the cars were numbered and religiously kept their correct position in the caravan sequence.

Mr. Turrill held a long-time interest in Death Valley, and had been studying its vast chemical resources for 20 years. His uncle, the Rev. E. W. Mecum of Los Angeles, often accompanied the field trip expedition and around evening campfires told of the sufferings his own father survived as a member of the Jayhawker group of emigrants through Death Valley in 1849.

When Mr. Turrill lost interest in sponsoring the Desert Trips (as well he might, since the 1929 trip attracted 38 cars with 165 students, parents, and faculty members from 15 Southern California schools and colleges), Mrs. Moir took over full responsibility as well as all her usual organizing duties beginning in 1930. She made the Desert Trip a regular Easter Vacation event at Glendale's newly opened Hoover High School where she taught chemistry.

Mrs. Moir was adept at organizing and arranging. Plant Managers turned out personally to welcome her groups and explain their plan-for-the-day which was always expansive and generous. The facilities of the Southwestern Portland Cement plant at Victorville and the American Potash and Chemical plant at Trona were "regulars" every year. Both companies were always gracious in providing camping areas for the entire caravan, inside when the weather was inclement. The



After a night at Valley Wells, a stop is made to visit the American Potash and Chemical plant at Trona before returning home via Poison Canyon, China Lake, and Mojave.

Water was sampled at Bennett's Well where the old windmill was still operating efficiently in 1932 at the time this picture was made.

Group photo of members of the 1930 expedition during stop to explore a small mine. Note old mine car in foreground.

Cement Plant also provided train transportation in open gondola cars to their quarry some miles away, and the Trona Plant showed off their brine wells out on the Searles Lake playa.

Dante's View, Badwater, the Salt Pools and Mushroom Rock (before it collapsed) were all visited in due course as were Old Harmony Borax Works and Mustard Canyon, Bennett's Well and Jim Dayton's grave. Scotty's Castle was always a "must" and Scotty himself often showed up as the group was shown through cool, dark rooms with their deep carpets and water running through or over piled up rocks. Less often one or both Johnsons were "at home" to the visitors. On at least one occasion the great pipe organ was activated by Mrs. Johnson who, after quite a rousing recital, told Mrs. Moir that she "was just a little desert mouse living with a couple of rats."

During those early years Scotty still had hopes of finishing his

The 1930 caravan stops to question and photograph a local prospector along the road between Scotty's Castle and the Sand Dunes.

The Indian camp was close to Furnace Creek Ranch when this picture was taken in 1930.

swimming pool, the Indian laborers lived in their crowded camp across the road, and Railroad Canyon was full of thousands of neatly stacked railroad ties hauled in from Bonnie Claire, just across the state line a few miles, in Nevada. (The post office at this location—which operated from July 13, 1909 to Dec. 31, 1931—used the spelling Bonnie *Clare*, reportedly named for the daughter of an early settler from Europe.)

The Pacific Coast Borax Company welcomed the groups to their facilities at Death Valley Junction, Furnace Creek Ranch, Texas Springs, and later to the new swimming pool at the Furnace Creek Inn. Plank seats were installed in mine cars at Ryan and the groups were trammed through the borax tunnels where colemanite crystals reflected light as would diamonds in a cave. And the Ryan mess hall would be opened for a full sit-down lunch for every caravan, long after underground operations at that mountainside mining camp had been shut down.

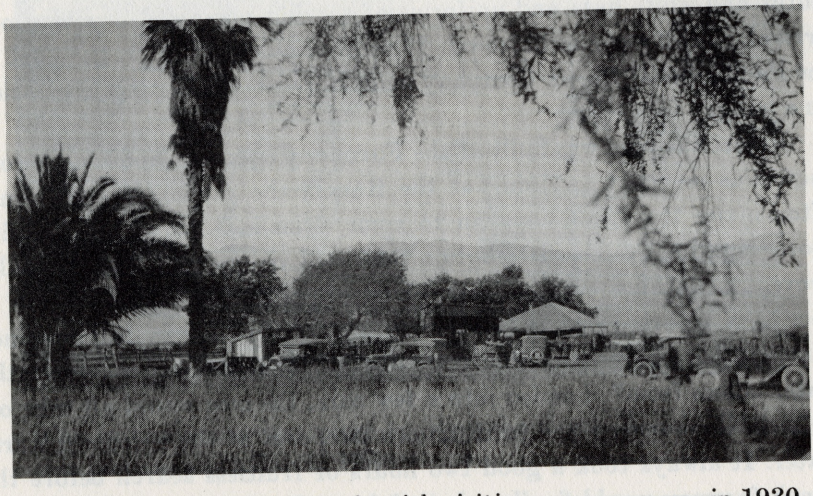
This writer remembers with great pleasure a full sit-down supper, compliments of the Company, at Death Valley Junction. The large dining hall, complete with electric lights reflecting from the white tablecloths and white hats and uniforms of serving personnel awaiting our arrival, is still clear in his mind. That gracious gesture on the part of the Pacific Coast Borax Company made a great and lasting impression on a hungry teen-ager.

Before the pool was built at the Furnace Creek Inn, and long before there was much of anything at the Ranch, the ranch foreman would often invite the whole caravan to come swim in a tiny three by five foot irrigation system distribution tank still visible near the date palm grove. As bathing suits were in short supply (who would believe it necessary to bring one to Death Valley) the foreman would announce that another pool was available for the men "up the canyon where the water comes from". Loaded into a few cars, the men would all take off to leave the women alone to their own purposes at the welcomed warm water. It always took a good two hours of fruitless search before the ranch foreman would finally admit defeat, that he just could not find

that second pool. Only now, with the women already back at Texas Springs organizing their sleeping spots for the night and the men needing a bath more than the women ever did, would the men be escorted back to the ranch for their time at the water.

During the years of construction at Hoover Dam, the Desert Trip swung eastward to Las Vegas and Boulder City before moving north to approach Death Valley via Scotty's Castle or Rhyolite and Titus Canyon. At Boulder City the caravan always had lunch with the construction crews at one of the Anderson Brothers fantastic family-table mess halls. And Mrs. Moir always saw to it that a major Six Companies manager or engineer escorted the group down into the construction area, often right onto the lower cofferdam in the canyon bottom.

Later, when insurance problems made it impossible to promote tours through construction jobs and chemical plants, or Ryan completely shut down and was no longer available, the yearly caravan went even farther east and took in Grand Canyon, Zion, and Bryce National Parks, usually returning via Death Valley, Wildrose Canyon,



View of Furnace Creek Ranch, with visiting caravan cars, in 1930.

Ballarat and Trona. Sometime in there the old Nadeau Grade over the Slate Range was abandoned in favor of the present oiled alignment. That was a serious loss, a terrible setback to the old ways, the way life was lived on the desert.

Mrs. Moir sponsored and organized the Desert Trip, in addition to all her regular duties as a teacher of chemistry at Hoover High School in Glendale, California, almost every year (war years excepted) until 1955. Since that time no one has had the energy or interest to carry on the work she did so well for so many years. I wonder how many parents appreciated, or even recognized, the importance of her efforts in making Easter Vacation a time of recreational learning rather than what it is today, a skylarking high jinks with a new name, Spring Break.

And I must here add that I have long believed Mother Moir to be the finest mother-in-law in the whole wide world. □

• ABOUT *the* AUTHOR •

A product of the Glendale, California school system, the author participated in the 1931, 1932 and 1934 Easter Week Desert Trips through Death Valley as organized by Mrs. Moir and herein described. As a graduate of Colorado School of Mines, he worked at the old Golden Queen mine on Soledad Mountain near Mojave before leaving to run the Colorado River, being one of the first hundred visitors recorded through the Grand Canyon by boat. Having generated a healthy interest in the western deserts, he wrote a dozen or so articles for *Desert* magazine while he worked in heavy construction and later for Lockheed Aircraft. He published a small book on mountain man Thomas Smith and his Lost Pegleg gold mine, and a well received paperback on the 1849 emigrants through Death Valley and the trails they followed. Now retired, he has had several western-area articles published in *True West* and is still working on the elusive '49er trails through Death Valley, the Panamints, and the Slate Range.

Death Valley Cooler. Nick Rossi takes a needed break after helping to unload the equipment truck.

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